R4105-81, 5-U 12/9,

The Conference Board

Serving Business and Society for 75 Years

A Topical Report from the Consumer Research Center October 1991

Special Consumer Survey Report

The Issues of Public Concern: 1991

The Cost of Medical Care, Drug Abuse, and the Federal Budget Deficit top of the list of American public concerns, followed by Crime, Unemployment, and AIDS. Smoking, Race Relations, and the Threat of Nuclear War are regarded as the country's least serious issues. These are the findings of a Conference Board study in which people were asked to indicate the degree of seriousness with which they regard a list of 22 economic and social issues. Survey participants were given five response options, ranging from "most serious" to "least serious." National Family Opinion, Inc. conducted the survey for The Conference Board, based on a representative sample of 5,000 U.S. households.

An identical survey was conducted last year at about this time, in which the same issues were covered. There are some interesting differences between the two studies, both in the relative rank of the issues and in the degree of concern expressed. In the most recent survey, 90 percent of all respondents considered the Cost of Medical Care as a serious problem, up nearly two points from a year ago. Drug Abuse, however, is regarded with slightly less concern than earlier. The Federal Budget Deficit now ranks third in the public's list of concerns, up from fifth place in the year-ago probe. The largest change is in the public's view of Unemployment. This issue has moved up from twelfth to fifth place on the list. In the most recent study, more than 79 percent of all respondents indicated that the jobless problem is serious, up from less than 66 percent a year ago.

The Savings & Loan Crisis is also now regarded with considerably more concern by the public than last time. Currently, 77 percent of all survey respondents regard this to be a serious issue, up from 64 percent last year. This is among the largest changes registered for any of the problems covered. There was also a big rise in the public's concern about the loss of jobs in Manufacturing.

However, a number of problems are now causing somewhat less concern than previously. Pollution was considered to be serious by about 80 percent of the public last year, but now about 72 percent hold this view. The Homeless, and the Cost of Housing are also now regarded with less concern than previously.

There are considerable differences by age. Overall, the level of concern tends to rise with age. However, the differences in view vary considerably according to the particular issue. Those under age 25 are most concerned with Drug Abuse, Crime, AIDS, and Pollution. Also high on their list of worries are the quality of Elementary Education and, to a lesser extent, Unemployment. However, for many of the other items included in the study, young people are less concerned than those who are older. Households headed by persons aged 25-44 also have a high level of uneasiness with the Drug Abuse problem, AIDS, Poverty, Crime, and Pollution. However, highest on their list of worries are the Cost of Medical Care, and the quality of Education. Similarly, these are also the issues which

Copyright © 1991 by The Conference Board, Inc.

provoke the greatest concern among the more mature segments of the population—those in the age group 45-64. Older people, those 65 and over, have similar worries as the rest of the population, but at this age there is considerable concern about the Savings & Loan Crisis, and the Federal Budget Deficit. As would be expected, concern over the Cost of Medical Care is higher than for any other age group.

Similarly, the incidence of concern on most issues runs higher among those with modest incomes than among those that are better off financially. The degree of worry about Medical Care Costs runs considerably higher among those with low incomes than those in the more fortunate earning brackets. Among the other matters which cause low-income families a relatively high level of concern are the Cost of Housing and the Homeless. Understandably, as compared to the population generally, the affluent rate high on their list of concern such economic issues as the Federal Budget Deficit, and the Savings & Loan Crisis. Also, Elementary Education ranks fairly high among those in the top income brackets.

The issues that concern people are generally similar in most geographical regions—the Cost of Medical Care, Drug Abuse, and the Federal Budget Deficit are high on the list in almost all sections of the country. In New England, people are more concerned with Unemployment than in any other area. This issue is also high on the list in the Middle Atlantic region. The Cost of Housing receives a relatively high level of complaints in the Pacific states.

Many of the nation's problems are regarded as serious by almost all constituencies of the country. The rich and the poor, the young and the old, from the Eastern seabord to the Pacific coast, consider the rising costs of medical care as the nation's worst problem. There is also almost universal uneasiness with our ever-larger Federal Budget Deficit, with crime in the streets, and with drug abuse. These are problems which are likely to increasingly become major issues of the national political debate.

Fabian Linden

THE DEGREES OF PUBLIC CONCERN

Here are a number of economic and social issues which are causing many people concerm. How would you rate the seriousness of each one of these issues as compared to the others?

Survey Conducted 1991

	Most Serious ←				→ *Least Serious*	*Serious Concern**	
						1991	*1990*
	Percent of Respondents					*Percent*	
Cost of Medical Care	65.1	24.6	8.3	1.4	0.6	**89.7**	88.4
Drug Abuse	55.7	27.6	12.5	2.9	1.3	**83.3**	88.2
Federal Budget Deficit	52.7	28.0	15.5	2.8	1.0	**80.7**	78.2
Crime	46.8	33.2	16.9	2.4	0.7	**80.0**	81.2
Unemployment	46.7	32.6	16.5	3.6	0.7	**79.3**	65.8
AIDS	57.5	21.0	13.0	4.5	3.9	**78.5**	77.5
S & L Crisis	45.2	31.3	17.3	4.8	1.4	**76.5**	63.4
Elementary Education	43.8	30.2	19.1	5.1	1.8	**74.0**	74.2
Loss of Jobs in Mfg.	38.9	34.4	21.2	4.3	1.2	**73.3**	63.4
Poverty	47.2	25.8	18.6	6.3	2.1	**73.0**	70.8
Pollution	38.2	34.0	21.0	5.2	1.5	**72.2**	79.5
The Homeless	44.8	24.6	18.6	8.9	3.2	**69.4**	72.1
Alcoholism	37.8	29.3	22.0	8.4	2.5	**67.1**	70.4
Foreign Trade Deficit	28.7	35.8	26.9	5.9	2.8	**64.5**	64.5
Cost of Housing	27.7	32.8	28.6	8.2	2.6	**60.5**	66.1
Plight of Farmers	27.9	31.6	26.9	9.9	3.6	**59.5**	62.8
White Collar Crime	25.7	32.6	28.0	10.7	2.9	**58.3**	57.8
Higher Education	23.4	32.0	31.2	9.6	3.7	**55.4**	55.3
Child Care Facilities	24.8	27.3	30.5	11.7	5.7	**52.1**	52.5
Smoking	25.8	22.7	27.3	13.4	10.9	**48.5**	51.2
Race Relations	21.2	24.6	32.7	14.1	7.4	**45.8**	43.8
Threat of Nuclear War	10.7	14.6	24.9	26.2	23.7	**25.3**	26.0

* *This measure is the proportion of respondents indicating either Most Serious (first column) or Least Serious (second column).*

The Conference Board, 845 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022
The Conference Board Europe, Avenue Louise, 207-Bte 5, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium
The Conference Board of Canada, 255 Smyth Road, Ottawa, Ontario, KIH-8M7